

Dark Greens

by Cindy Turner

“Wait, if you’re half-Chinese and half-white, what does your family eat at home?” I never understood why being multi-racial stirred up this question as often as it did. Regardless of race, didn’t most American families living in a large city like Houston find themselves having tacos for dinner one night and then Chinese takeout for the next?

The only food my family ate consistently and in large quantities was broccoli. Cheap, flowery, and convenient, it was the vegetable most likely to accent that night’s pasta or fried rice. Sometimes, my brother and I would fight over the last piece sitting on the plate at the middle of the table. Other times my mom would scold us for eating too rapaciously and not leaving her share.

My mom cooked it the same way every time. Boil it in an uncovered pot for an intuitive amount of time, ladle it onto a plate, and season it immediately with salt and pepper. When I turned ten, I was old enough to be responsible for cooking the broccoli. It took me several tries to discover that intuitive amount of time. During dinner, my brother would comment pointedly in my direction on either the broccoli’s excessive rawness or soginess. In exchange, I’d narrow my eyes and throw him a death stare, silently warning him to watch his back.

Broccoli originated from southern Italy and came to the United States with immigrants from that region. The broccoli found in supermarkets today is the product of careful cultivation. Today, China is the largest producer of broccoli, making up of forty percent of the world market.

At school, I was shocked to discover that the majority of my peers hated broccoli and that their mothers had to coerce them into eating it. Despite its ubiquitous presence at our dinner tables, broccoli instigates the same visceral disgust in every age group. In March of 1990, President George H.W. Bush shared his thoughts on broccoli at a press conference covering a European policy. He proudly declared before a group of eager reporters, “I do not like broccoli, and I haven’t

liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I'm President of the United States, and I'm not going to eat any more broccoli!" This comment was followed by a round of laughter and enthusiastic applause. And alas, I'm left knowing nothing about the developments in Europe, March of 1990.

In the sixth grade, I joined a junior repertoire ballet company with a girl named Candace who lived two blocks away from my house. Naturally, our mothers formed a carpool and some nights after ballet class, Candace, a picky eater, would join us for dinner. One of those nights it was spaghetti bolognese and broccoli. After finishing her plate, Candace asked if she could have more broccoli to which my mom delightedly replied, "Of course!"

My mom's broccoli was a strange point of pride for all of us, and we would frequently cite our memory of Candace, the picky eater, asking for more broccoli to defend our deep appreciation for the vegetable. In 2013, the *New York Times* reported on broccoli's official "presidential comeback." At a kid's state dinner, an event that was a part of the First Lady's anti-obesity campaign, President Obama was asked a definitive question, "What's your favorite food?" His answer? "Broccoli."

Later that year, the *New York Times* writer Michael Moss commissioned Victor & Spoils, an ad agency, to come up with a campaign to make broccoli appealing. The best food marketers in the business spent a week seeking out the best broccoli dishes in the country, talking to broccoli farmers in California, and sitting around the table trying to find a way to sell broccoli to the American public. The ideas they came up with included making broccoli the masculine part of a weekend barbecue and pitting broccoli as a favorable contender to kale. According to the executive of the campaign, the winner of the ideas was the "broquet." A bouquet for your bro, but instead of flowers, a "broquet" is made of broccoli.

I can't seem to see why you would need to come up with all of this unconvincing fuss to persuade people to eat broccoli anyways. What could be so terrible about eating broccoli when it is properly cooked? With the ubiquitous emergence of kale on the cover of national health magazines, experts all agree dark greens are the way to health and

longevity. Broccoli allegedly has a chemical makeup that can combat the effect of carcinogens in the body. Dark greens are low-calorie, cancer fighting, green machines that should be a part of all of our diets.

I spent my spring semester, sophomore year studying abroad in Beijing, China. I hated the canteens because the food was too greasy and too salty and the tables were littered with bones or egg peels from the previous occupant's meal. But there weren't kitchens in the international student apartments that I was living in, so I was left to eat at the canteens. One day, I went to get dinner at a canteen that I rarely frequented because of its distance from the apartments. I sat down, and began to eat. After a moment, a Chinese girl carrying a tray sat down at a table not too far from mine. I could see that she only had two small plates on her tray. Both of the plates were servings of broccoli, stir-fried with garlic.

I couldn't help but watch her as she slowly ate the broccoli over the course of an hour. She was very thin, but I told myself that physical appearance is among the least accurate indicators of health. I couldn't imagine this happening in America. Not because Americans hate broccoli, but because a girl would never eat nothing but two plates of broccoli in public knowing the questions she would raise.

I remembered all the times my Chinese relatives had commented on my size, either directly to me or to my mom. The word they use is 壮/*zhuang*. They say I am built very strong and muscular like my dad, as if I carry no resemblance to my thin, five-foot tall mother. If you wanted, you could even stretch the translation of *zhuang* into athletic, but that sounds almost like a compliment in English. One night, I sat with my cousins and aunts and grandmother around a dinner table piled with dumplings, pan-fried fish, *baijiu*, and beers. At one point during the conversation, one of my aunts made note of my brother's slight, thin build. Wouldn't it have been perfect if my and my brother's body type had been switched, she declared.

When I tell people about these comments that my family makes, I add the disclaimer that it doesn't really bother me, at least not to my core. My family wouldn't understand if I told them I wasn't okay with their

comments. It's the same way my mom's sister doesn't understand why smoking is bad for her, why my mom left behind a family in China, or why she shouldn't let her husband hit her.

I remembered how openly they made these comments, and I understood how openly this girl ate her two plates of broccoli. Didn't she know she made me think of the upstart model on ABC News who ate broccoli and carrots to feel full?

Tonight, I came home to have broccoli and leftover spaghetti bolognese for dinner. I put the leftovers in the microwave, and then I put a pot of water on the stove. I listen passively to the sound of the gas stove turning on, a combination of a clacking and a ticking, maybe tacking. I wait anxiously for the bubbles to rise out of the water. Finally, a pocket of air surfaces. I play with fire to pass the time, turning the heat higher and lower to watch the speed of bubbling change immediately in response.

I pour the washed and cut broccoli into the pot. I leave it in for an intuitive amount of time. I ladle it onto a plate. And I season it immediately with nothing but salt and pepper.